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Stubborn as a Mule

By Maurice Kirby

IT'S sure funny about some guys; they never seem to learn. Like Bill. The best oyster stews I ever had, I had at Bill's. He lived by himself, and he was always inviting somebody out to supper. Liked company, he said. But when he was on a job he'd get to talking, telling you how you were either connecting something up backwards, or how you could save yourself some time if you'd just listen to him. And then he'd take the wires right out of your hands and start connecting them up himself. That would just make the hair on the back of my neck stand up, because he wasn't supposed to know any more than the rest of us, as far as the company was concerned. It was the same way with the rest of the fellows, too. We used to tell him that his head lagged his mouth by ninety degrees—an electrical way of saying that he talked too much. What burned us,

though, was that he was right about half the time, and he saved us some pretty foolish mistakes. But it was the other half the time that makes me remember him so well.

WE HAD a converter to test—the whole crew of us—and we were all greenhorns. All but Bill. He was a practical man from away back. Well, here was the machine, sitting right in the middle of the test floor at the end of the assembly line. And here came the boss, not very much older than we were, and a pretty decent sort of a guy. He pointed at me and a couple of the other fellows and said, "You men get down underneath and connect the leads." Then he went on down the line, and when he got to Bill, he said, "And you connect up the meters and read 'em."

Then I was down on my back underneath the machine, with a couple of connecting leads the size of a garden hose in one hand and a wrench in the other. There was a coat of old oil on that floor from machines tested before; then a coat of new oil, dropped from this machine; and floating on top of the new oil was a film of tobacco juice. They came up through the back of my coveralls—first the tobacco juice, then the new oil, then the old oil, and it was hot, and the leads were heavy, and I began to wonder why in Sam Hill I hadn't gone out for wrestling when I was in college, instead of playing chess all the time. About the time I was getting used to it, I heard Bill arguing with the boss about how to connect up the meters.

"LISTEN," said the boss, getting hot, "they've been connecting rotary converters this way for the last ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, and haven't ever blown one yet. I said to . . ."

"Sure," Bill broke in. "Sure. Three-phase converters. But this is six-phase. That gives you a dead short right here. See?"

And Bill was right. It was almost funny, his telling the boss what to do. But the boss didn't think so.

"Ugh," said the boss, "this is six-phase, isn't it?" Then he scratched his head, like he was thinking about what might have happened if they had left that short circuit in. It would have cost everybody plenty. Then he got mad. But Bill kept on talking.

"I remember one time I was working on a high line out west and we got our three and six-phase mixed up, and . ."

The boss almost blew up, and I don't blame him. But you can't cuss somebody for keeping you from making a mistake.

"All right. All right!" he said. "Connect your damn test up any way you want to. But you pay for your own meters." And he went away.

THAT fixed Bill up. He just about went crazy, like a dog in a meat market, telling all of us what to do, and how we should hook everything up. He had a couple of test boards loaded with meters, and there were leads running from the boards to the machine, and then over to the power panel, waiting to be plugged in. The little wires running between the meters on the boards looked like bunches of hair that hadn't been combed. Finally I came up from under the machine, feeling like a lizard.

"Ready to plug in?" I asked him.

"O. K. Plug her in," he said, and I went over to the power panel to connect us to the power supply. Bill was going to start the machine himself, over at the test board, after I plugged in. Just as I got things connected, I heard him say:

"I got an idea, fellows. If we reverse these two meter wires, we can save ourselves a little time. Like this," and he picked up two of the wires, disconnected them, and held the free ends in his hand.

"Look out!" one of the fellows yelled at him. "Look out! That's hot, and those wattmeters cost forty dollars apiece if you blow one!"

"Why, there isn't anything to worry about," said Bill. "I used to work 2300 volts hot all the time. I remember one time I was up in a crow's nest, working like that, and the whole place was hot. The transformer cases would tickle you when you sat on them, and the pole was so wet you could feel the voltage when you put one hand two feet below the other one, like this . . . . "

And then there was the most God-awful bang. It didn't build up, like thunder. It was quick and sharp, like a rifle report. The whole place seemed to be full of sound all of a

sudden, like it gets dark when you turn off the light. When I got there, Bill was looking at one finger, black up and down the side, and there were little beads like gold all over the test board, where bubbles of white-hot brass had been blown by the short circuit.

BUT his hide must have been tough as an elephant's. "I don't need any doctor," he said; "I'll take care of it at home tonight. I must have touched one of the connections with the hot end of a wire."

The boss came running over, sliding on the floor like he was on ice skates. When he saw that Bill wasn't hurt much, he began to get mad. He got so mad he couldn't even swear.

Nothing could stop Bill from talking. "Why," he said, "I just got a little too close with a couple of wires. It was just a little short circuit. I got it all connected up again now. I don't think we even blew any meters."

If I'd been the boss, I would have fired Bill, right there. But the boss had almost made a mistake that would have cost real money, and Bill had stopped him. And maybe the boss remembered the time when somebody opened the field on a motor, and the thing started to run away. All of us, even the boss, started out for the open country then, or tried to hide behind steel pillars, because when a motor runs away it goes faster and faster until it blows itself up. But Bill found time to shut off the power before he ran, and pretty soon we all came out of our hiding places, looking foolish.

SO THE boss looked at Bill. "Oh, hell!" he said, in a tired sort of voice, and walked away. But we had to pay for two blown-out meters, and none of us went anywhere over Labor Day. We had oyster stew out at Bill's instead.

You'd think that would teach him a lesson. But he kept on taking chances, and talking. Every month or two he had a close call, but as long as he didn't do anything worse than scare us, they kept him. Besides, he could work faster than any two of the rest of us, and he was mighty friendly with his oyster stews.

After a while, they sent the gang of us out on a rush job of installation in a little town across the state. We were supposed to put in a lot of substation equipment, and do it fast. The equipment was there ahead of us, and we worked day and night.

"Boys," said Bill, working on a catwalk behind the main panel one night, "this reminds me of when I used to work on high lines out west—"

"Nuts!" said somebody. "You never did any real engineering until you came east."

THAT made Bill mad, and they began to argue. Bill argued while he worked; it was fun to watch him. He'd get excited and grab a wrench or the end of a cable to gesture with, and he'd wave and point that with one hand while he waggled the other arm behind him to keep his balance on the catwalk. The rest of us had to stop work to argue, and it was nearly morning when we finished wiring that section of the substation.

"Well," said Bill, "I guess we're about ready to cut in."

"Wait a minute," said one of the gang. "Let's check over the wiring again. I feel a little shaky about this."

"Hell," said Bill, "this section's all right. I wired my part O. K. Let's cut in and see if she works, and then we can go home."

There was a little more argument, mostly because we were still in the mood to argue with Bill, but we were all tired, and the idea of sleep sounded good. Bill went over to the panel and closed the switch.

As soon as he pulled the lever down, the rear of the panel exploded like a firecracker. The thick copper bus bars got so hot they didn't wait to melt; they just blew up. Big sparks began jumping and banging everywhere, and the other end of the station was full of electrical fire that was so hot it couldn't be fire any more—it was a continual explosion. Bill was nearest to it, and he got the worst. The rest of us got outside one way and another. One of the fellows ran for a doctor, and some of us tried to fish Bill out. He was thrown clear, but badly burned, and we got him out with long poles.

WE MADE him as comfortable as we could, on the lawn outside, and waited for the doctor. Every light in town was off, and the wind moaned a little, like it was in a graveyard. Something had blown a hole through the roof of the substation, and the moon sent eerie shadows down onto the tangle inside. There were little cracklings and hissings, and little blue sparks popped away down low in the wreckage, and everything was chilly and lonesome.

Finally the doctor came, and we took Bill to his office. Then we stood around in the dark waiting room. After a while the doctor came out and said, "He's bad. If I'd had some lights at first, I might possibly have helped him. Flashlights weren't enough. You boys better go in and see him now, while you can—"

Bill was bad, all right. But he smiled a little when we came in.

"By golly," he said, "I never did anything like this out west .... what happened?"

"Number three transformer was in backwards," said one of the boys. The moon was going down, and it was getting darker in the doctor's office.

"Number three," said Bill. "I did that one myself. I guess it's my own fault all right. I remember one time out west . ."

The doctor motioned to us, and we filed out of the office, one by one, bumping our shins here and there in the dark. The door closed behind us, and the last we heard was, "It's my own fault—"

It was his own fault, all right. I'll bet he's up there now, telling St. Peter and a couple of angels how he worked on a high line out west. Only I hope they're a little more patient about listening to him than we were.